



Respect: The Bridge Between Natural Rights and a Free Society

Thousands of years ago the question was asked: "Am I my brother's keeper?" Yes, I am...I am under a moral obligation to him that is inspired, not by any maudlin sentimentality, but by the higher duty I owe to myself (Debs).

When I began homeschooling two years ago, I found myself learning more on the weekends than I did during the school week. Classwork kept me housebound from Monday until Friday, but I was never home on Saturday or Sunday. On the streets of Boston, I organized and rallied, canvassed and marched, spoke and listened. The city became my classroom, and every citizen my teacher. And what I learned from them was this: depending on your definition of a "free society," an understanding of natural rights and respect is not enough to build one.

Most of my time during those long weekends was spent canvassing for local candidates, knocking on doors and speaking to residents about upcoming elections and civic events. Canvassing teaches you quite a lot about the city you live in—you learn the opinions of your fellow citizens, you get a sense for the political geography of your town, and you often get a chance to speak with the politicians themselves. Those conversations with citizens and politicians alike have also taught me respect: respect for those whose ideas I disagree with, and respect for those who spend their lives bettering their communities. But respect, that cornerstone of civil society, is easily hijacked by bad actors. In February of last year, New England neo-nazi group NSC-131 marched peacefully to an overpass overlooking Storrow Drive and draped banners across the railing ("Nationalist Social Club"). "White patience has limits," one banner declared, as a man wearing a skull-decal mask offered fascist pamphlets to passersby. The law respected the neo-nazis' right to free speech, such that the propaganda video of the event released by the group has three separate shots of police cars idling as NSC members march past (ChuckyD56). Looking at the historical dangers of fascism and the unchecked spread of hateful disinformation, we must ask: is this a respect worth having? Can a free society defend the cruel speech and political activism of ideologues like these?

If respect is overzealous in its protection of cruelty and ignorance, then the auspices of natural rights are so timid as to allow even more outrageous cruelties. While canvassing near Newton, I once spoke to the owners of a four-story mansion, and then crossed the street to talk to a homeless woman who owned nothing but the contents of her backpack. The mansion owners had their choice of half a dozen bedrooms to sleep in—the homeless woman had the choice of a doorway or a park bench. If I were to violate the natural right to property of the mansion owners and let the woman sleep in their house, would I have made society less free? Finland is the only European country with a shrinking homeless population—over the last 40 years, it dropped from some 20,000 to around 4341. How? Finland proclaimed housing to be a human right, regardless of substance use or illness (“Housing First Scheme”). Finland built new affordable housing for its homeless population, but we need not. In the U.S, there are 33 empty houses for every homeless person (“Homelessness and Empty Homes”). If it so wished, the government could violate the natural right to property of landlords and real estate conglomerates to enforce the human right to housing of the homeless. Instead, it gives the affluent the freedom to hoard houses, and the rest of us the freedom to rent at exorbitant prices or sleep on the streets. A free society would give homes to the homeless, instead of letting them remain in the hands of those who have more than they could ever use. The natural right to property is important, but it must be superseded by the human needs of others.

Natural rights and respect are better than nothing, but we deserve better. Instead of respect, which shields bigots from the same violence they espouse, we need compassion, which only flourishes when we “[make] room for others...and [understand] what each side needs” (Miller 1). Instead of natural rights, which provide the same protections to exploitative landlords and the homeless alike, we need human rights, which could create a society without either. Does freedom mean the right to oppress and be oppressed? Or does freedom mean the right to live above oppression, and the responsibility to lift all others to your station? We must surpass the miserly individualism of natural rights, and disregard the demands for respect from those who have none for us. For when we understand the freedom of our responsibility to others, we will be emancipated from greed by the privilege that is kindness.

Works Cited

- ChuckyD56. "NSC-131 WLM Action Conducted in Boston, MA - Banner Drop." Ww
w.bitchute.com, www.bitchute.com/video/944oDFG1AsxX/. Accessed 21 Mar.
- Debs, Eugene. "Eugene Debs, "the Issue" - the Rhetorical Goddess Wiki." Rhetoricalgoddess.wiki
dot.com, rhetoricalgoddess.wikidot.com/text:debs-issue. Accessed 4 Apr. 2022.
- "Housing First Scheme in Finland | Y-Foundation (Y-Säätiö)." Y-Foundation, 2018, ysa
tio.fi/en/housing-first-finland.
- "Homelessness & Empty Homes: Trends since 2010 | Self." Www.self.inc, 2022 www.self.inc/in
fo/empty-homes/.
- Miller, John P. "Educating for Compassion and Mutual Accommodation." International Journal of
Educational Research, vol. 109, 2021, p. 101847, 10.1016/j.ijer.2021.101847. Accessed 4
Apr. 2022.
- "Nationalist Social Club (NSC)." Anti-Defamation League, www.adl.org/resources/background
ers/nationalist-social-club-nsc.